

John Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, Sage Publications Ltd., 1993, pp. 162-164

Personhood: Identity and belonging

As what people say and do is always open to criticism and judgment by others, an essential part of their being free individuals in a modern society, is their being able to justify their actions to others when required to do so—they require a capacity to be able to articulate “good reasons” for their conduct. For, in executing their own actions, in acting as free agents (and in qualifying for their status as such), people cannot just act as they please, when they please. They must also act with a certain kind of socially shared awareness, to do with making judgments about the boundaries in terms of which their surroundings should be organized perceptually, and within which their actions should be seen as making sense (Douglas, 1975): judgments, for instance, to do with what should be seen as obvious, as familiar, as similar or dissimilar, as ordinary, with what should be seen as extraordinary, as strange, as repugnant, awesome, enchanting, frightening, comic, as evocative of reverence or of unquestionable authority, as interesting or boring, with what can be used for one’s own ends and what must be respected as an end in itself, and to do so with which actions (as ends in themselves) must be taken seriously and responded to and which can be ignored and dismissed—and so on. And in respecting such boundaries in their actions, they of course continually reproduce them. Indeed, in relation to this last point, to qualify for the special, socially autonomous status of citizens, and to be allowed to move freely within all the “spaces” in their society, human agents must be able to show in their actions, as a special aspect of their perceptual awareness of their

surroundings, an awareness of how they are currently “placed” or “positioned” in relation to all the other agents around them. They must perceive themselves as being, not in an everywhere indifferently textured physical space, but as surrounded by a morally textured ‘landscape’ of ‘opportunities for action’ made differentially available to them according to their location amongst the other agents around them, and which they also may make available to them.

This is not, however, sufficient. For a person can only be said to be acting freely if they are not acting as a means, as a kind of puppet, through which others realize themselves. What is also required is a ‘sense of belonging’, a sense of ‘being at home’ in a reality that one’s actions help both to reproduce and to develop. To live within a community which one senses as being one’s own—as both ‘mine’ and ‘yours’, as ‘ours’ rather than ‘theirs’—one must be more than just an accountable reproducer of it. One must in a real sense also play a part in its creative sustaining of itself as a ‘living tradition’. One must be able to fashion one’s own ‘position’ within the ‘argument’ or ‘arguments’ to do with constituting and reconstituting the tradition. One must be able to feel that one’s formulations, whether ultimately accepted or not, will be at least welcomed and listened to seriously by the others around one. One must not feel that, in order to speak freely, one first has to prove to certain others, who already seem to possess a lifetime’s unconditional membership of the community, that one is qualified. For, to live under terms set only by others is always to feel, not just different, but inadequate in relation to them. Part of a sense of ‘belonging’, of a sense of being ‘at home’ in one’s own community, is that one has an automatic right of initial access to the community simply by virtue of having contributed, in

developing oneself, in the development of its ways of making sense. This does not mean that one will unthinkingly feel a sense of total harmony with those around one. Indeed, it means that one must live within a number of conflicting and competing ‘forms of life’ with their associated ‘language games’ (to use Wittgenstein’s terms). But it does mean not having a sense of being an intrusive alien, with having worth as who one is.

But inevitably, there is a scarcity of such opportunities to participate in this way, and their availability thus involves a political economy. This is because, for instance, other people can only realize themselves in the world as speakers if others are prepared to make themselves properly available to them as listeners. And to do that, they must treat what speakers say *seriously*, that is, listeners must treat their actions as having important consequences for them—which means either their giving up their own activities to become involved in those of the speaker, or giving speakers good reasons as to why they are not prepared to do so. Indeed, in general, any significant social identity entails in its realization the enactment of a certain set of rights and duties, a moral dependence upon others and a moral requirement to offer to them what I shall call socio-ontological resources—that is, the communicative opportunities we all require if we are to realize our own distinctive modes of being. We make these resources available to each other, not only when we act as primary caretakers (as parents to young children), or as teachers or instructors, or act explicitly to render help to others, but also when we act towards one another in merely routine ways, as listeners, as readers, as “you’s” to their ‘I’s’, as recipients of their actions in any way (Shotter, 1989b).

This is reflected in Aristotle’s account of ‘the Good’ in *The Nicomachean Ethics*: it means that even when all alone and

acting solely upon one's own account, if our actions are to be accounted by others as good actions, as directed (in his terms) towards some 'self-sufficient final end', then they must in some way take into account in their performance our relation to others

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And indeed, to the extent that people's identities are a function of their social relations, if they want to sustain their identities, the ontological security of their social being, they must sustain—that is, morally respect—both the identities of those around them, and the social relations which sustain those identities. This is a task, the practicalities of which are as difficult to articulate as they are to execute. But I emphasize its nature as a task here, however, to make the point that we are not naturally endowed with this kind of freedom: it is an achievement of a puzzling and arduous kind. In order to possess it, we must continuously labour to create the social conditions which make it possible; and its burdensome nature becomes especially apparent in times of social crisis, when a breakdown of public life threatens, and people's relations to the others around them become particularly unclear. In such times, individuals want to be rid of such a bewildering responsibility; they lose their confidence in their power to change the social circumstances of their lives through argumentation and coordinated deliberative action; and they return to a belief in the power of 'magical' or 'mythical' entities in Nature at large to solve their problems (Cassirer, 1946)—such as our current belief that the 'natural' power of 'the invisible hand' of 'the market' will most certainly produce what 'socialist' central planning failed to achieve.